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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LAGOS 000630

SIPDIS

CAIRO FOR POL -- MAXSTADT

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TAGS: CASC EPET ENRG PINS PGOV PHUM KDEM NI

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: ETHNIC POLITICS AND NIGER DELTA CRISIS

REF: A. ABUJA 00558

B. ABUJA 00555

C. ABUJA 00554

D. LAGOS 624

E. LAGOS 575

F. LAGOS 568

Classified By: CONSUL GENERAL ROBYN HINSON-JONES. REASON: 1.5 (B & D)

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY. The violent Ijaw confrontations of the Itsekiri in the oil-rich Escravos area result from their fierce political competition to control the South-west Warri Local Government. The chairmanship of this local government is seen as a lynchpin to the Ijaw's economic survival. If their demands are not met, the Ijaw intend to keep fighting to disrupt the April 12 local elections. Although the Ijaw's stated target is neither the oil companies nor the Federal Government, ethnic dimensions of outside groups color the Ijaws' views of Niger Delta politics and the larger polity. Among the many stakes in the crisis is the legitimacy of the election outcome. END SUMMARY.

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IJAW MOTIVATIONS & INTENT TO DISRUPT LOCAL ELECTIONS  
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12. (C) Joshua Fumodoh (strictly protect), former president of the Ijaw National Congress, confirms that Ijaw youths intend to "correct the anomaly" of the distribution of wards in the South-west Warri Local Government of Delta State "by any means necessary" before local elections take place. Oil companies are not the target. The target is strictly the balance of political power between Ijaw and Itsekiri, the two main riverine groups of the area. The Ijaw regard themselves as the majority ethnic group in this area and the Itsekiri as a minority group. Under redistricting enacted after the 1999 elections, 6 of the 10 wards of this local government were demarcated to the Itsekiri, according to Fumodoh. The Ijaw view the chairmanship to the local government as paramount to allocating government revenue, and they see government as the region's sole means of economic resources outside of the oil industry. The Ijaw see attaining the local government chairmanship as a life-or-death issue.

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IJAW AND NIGER DELTA ETHNIC POLITICS  
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13. (C) The Ijaw do not think President Obasanjo is a neutral actor in the crisis, due in part to his Yoruba ethnic heritage. The Ijaw believe the Itsekiri are actually Yoruba affiliates, saying the Itsekiri actually "speak Yoruba with an accent." Fumudoh says, "Despite Obasanjo's style to appear indifferent and aloof regarding all conflict situations, we believe he feels strongly about these issues on the inside. All the Ijaw want is for the president to be fair. We see him as siding with the Itsekiri, though he covers up his true feelings through his official language." This belief was further fueled over the weekend of March 22-23 by reports of press statements given by Afenifere and the Yoruba Council of Elders (traditional Yoruba political interest groups) condemning the Ijaw's moves against the Itsekiri. Fumodoh said the reports indicate that Yoruba groups would "take up arms against the Ijaw" if the fighting does not end.

14. (C) As discussed in ref B, the Army Chief of Staff is regarded by the Ijaw as a member of the Isoko ethnic group, a subset of the Urhobo group. Fumodoh says the Urhobo, as a mainland and not riverine ethnic group, are generally seen as neutral and outside this conflict between Ijaw and Itsekiri

(septel will explain complexities and contradictions of this issue). Delta State Governor James Ibori is generally respected by the Ijaw as a peace-maker for his former roles in the ethnic conflict, although his mother is Itsekiri and his father Urhobo (septel to follow on Warri-Niger Delta politics).

¶5. (C) COMMENT. Although the Ijaw may outnumber the Itsekiri nation-wide, Fumudoh has previously conceded to poloffs that the Ijaw constituency's status within a geopolitical area depends heavily on the boundary demarcations. Gerrymandering directly impacts Ijaw political power. The Ijaw believe that oil production has disrupted their traditional means of economic sustenance (i.e. fishing), and that government provides their only alternate means of survival. Until a third option of viable private sector employment develops in their region, or until the spoils of power are seen by constituents as being distributed among minority and majority groups alike, the Ijaw are unlikely to end their quest for political power by any means necessary. At risk are lives, long-term stability for oil production, property, and the legitimacy of local government elections in the Niger Delta. END COMMENT.

HINSON-JONES